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Isolation among rural clergy: Exploring experiences and solutions in one diocese.

Bill Stuart-White, Jane Vaughan-Wilson, John Eatock,

Judith A. Muskett, and Andrew Village

Author note. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Dr Judith A.

Muskett, School of Humanities, Religion & Philosophy, York St John University, Lord

Mayor's Walk, York YO31 7EX. UK. Email: j.muskett@yorksj.ac.uk

5.2.18

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Abstract

There is a growing academic interest in isolation in rural communities. A particular sense of isolation may be experienced by rural clergy whose distinct sacrificial calling can place them in the centre of the community while not being included in it. The sense of isolation can be acute for clergy over-extended in multi-parish benefices. It can also be exacerbated by a range of individual differences among clergy and also by clergy themselves. Unaddressed, the burden of isolation can have a detrimental effect on work-related psychological health. This study reports the findings of a questionnaire survey about clergy experiences of isolation and solutions to it in a rural diocese which is embedding within its structures opportunities to enhance the care and efficacy of its ministers. Two thirds of the 87 participants felt isolated to some extent, while one third did not feel isolated at all. Significantly higher scores of isolation were recorded by: stipendiary clergy (compared with self-supporting clergy); clergy working alone (compared with clergy working in teams); and clergy working in multi-parish contexts (compared with clergy working elsewhere). Existing support structures are explored, as well as new opportunities for mutual support: 79% of participants reported being supported by other clergy; and 53% found deanery chapter a support. Nearly 30% were supported by a cell group or other small group. Several participants suggested that opportunities for informal fellowship at deanery chapter could be a solution to their isolation. However, there are dangers that diocesan interventions to solve the problem of isolation may be perceived as yet another 'initiative' or present as one more among multiple overwhelmings.

Introduction

There is a growing academic interest in isolation and in the effectiveness of strategies to combat the sense of isolation, particularly in rural contexts (Mills, 2017). While isolation may affect the whole People of God in rural settings, it can present particular challenges to ordained ministers there. The burden of isolation can be damaging to the work-related psychological health of rural clergy (Francis, Laycock, & Brewster, 2015). The importance of addressing clergy isolation and of promoting collegiality among Anglican clergy, in order to enhance the effectiveness of rural ministry and mission, was recognised in the report *Released for mission, growing the rural church* (Rural Affairs Group of the General Synod, 2015). Mutual support among clergy was also promoted within the revised *Guidelines for the professional conduct of clergy* (Convocations of Canterbury and York, 2015), where Guidelines 7.4, 13.3 and 14.6 underscore the importance of collegiality and sharing the journey of faith with a companion. Against this background, the aims of the study reported in this paper were three-fold: to explore the sense of isolation among Anglican clergy serving within one particular rural diocese, to investigate the support structures that those clergy had in place to help them in their ministry, and to discover what ideas the clergy had to create new opportunities for mutual support and how they thought the diocese might facilitate that. The findings of the study informed the deliberations of a diocesan working party charged with developing policy around clergy support.

The paper will now proceed in six steps. First, it establishes the new study within the literatures that informed it, beginning with a definition of isolation; second, it outlines the method adopted for the study; third, it presents the results, with discussion; and fourth, a number of conclusions are drawn. Fifth, in a postscript, the paper explains how the findings shaped policy; and sixth, it offers suggestions for further work.

One aim of this paper is to share the survey data, in the expectation that there may be learning points for other dioceses and their clergy. Disseminating the findings more widely is timely, especially in light of the proposals on clergy wellbeing from the House of Clergy to General Synod ('clergy wellbeing' being the shorthand term adopted in the report to include proper support for clergy, guidance, practical help and assistance in the conduct of their ministries). Those proposals sought to ensure that, as far as possible, 'clergy themselves are active participants in ensuring their own wellbeing' (Butler, 2017, p. 2).

Defining isolation

A range of research and scholarship on the theme of isolation affecting rural communities has been charted by Mills (2016, 2017), whose own research has made a singular contribution to defining the term 'isolation' and distinguishing its categories. As compared with the concept of loneliness (with which it may, or may not, be associated), isolation can be defined with relatively clarity. For her part, Mills (2016) has identified isolation as the lack of meaningful relationships, with loneliness, on the other hand, being described as the subjective psychological product of such isolation (Mills, 2016).

On the basis of Weiss's (1973) seminal work, Mills (2016, pp. 14-16) has drawn a distinction between several different types of isolation: emotional (the absence of close/intimate attachment); social (the absence of a wider circle of friends); geographical (the remoteness of the place of residence, perhaps with limited transport links); cultural (where a different culture is prevalent); spiritual (a lack of spiritual support – contrasting with voluntary solitude); and technological (a perception resulting from a poor broadband or mobile telephone signal). Spiritual isolation contrasts with voluntary solitude, which in turn draws attention to positive aspects of 'aloneness' (Mills, 2017).

Isolation in rural ministry

The particular blend of isolation associated with the unique demands of ordained ministry, especially in a rural context, may encompass one or more of the types identified by Mills. The distinct sacrificial calling where the minister is the focus of community but not included in it (Church of England, 2007; Bloom, 2013) can cause social isolation, as can a lack of good friendships with peers in ministry or a perceived lack of acceptance into the wider clergy community (Bloom, 2013). A range of recent literature focusing on pressures in rural ministry (e.g., Rolph & Rolph, 2008; Greenslade, 2009; Rolph, Rolph, & Cole, 2009; Rolph, ap Siôn, Francis, & Rolph, 2014; Brewster, 2015) indicates that little may have changed since a landmark report on the deployment of clergy more than half a century ago (Paul, 1964), where a survey in a chapter devoted to 'clergy isolation' highlighted the significance of social, geographical, spiritual and cultural isolation. Paul's data revealed a pattern of over-extension, the problem of distances, the melting away of social support for the rural priest, intellectual and cultural isolation, a loss of heart when ministering to tiny congregations week-by-week, and breakdowns (pp. 83-86). The sentiments of one rural priest interviewed for Paul's study of clergy isolation were expressed in this way: 'We have no one to whom we can turn… Fellowship is a word much bandied about in the Church, but the substance of it barely exists' (p. 86). '"To whom can I speak?" they often cry' wrote Paul (1964, p. 137).

Factors exacerbating a sense of isolation in ministry

The sense of isolation that can be associated with the uniqueness of the call to ordained ministry may be exacerbated by a range of factors, including individual differences.

First, the sense of isolation can be acute for those who are over-extended in multi-parish benefices (Francis & Brewster, 2012). Consequent upon declining numbers of clergy, one of the most significant factors in rural ministry is the number of churches grouped

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together under the leadership of a single incumbent, often with long distances and lengthy travel times between the different church buildings and communities (Rural Affairs Group of the General Synod, 2015). As the *Faith in the Countryside* report (Archbishops' Commission on Rural Areas, 1990) put it:

> The multi-parish benefice is fact of life for the time being in many rural areas, whether it is staffed in practice by a sole incumbent or by an extensive ministry team of one kind or another. A key problem for clergy is the sense of professional isolation, since rural clergy can be so many miles apart. (§8.79, p. 169)

Communication and day-to-day management in such church groupings can be made easier by modern technology, but such technology tends to be a substitute for face-to-face personal contact (Burgess, 2016).

Second, the sense of isolation may be exacerbated by the fact that, in terms of psychological type, Anglican clergy (both men and women) tend to have a clear preference for introversion over extraversion (see Watt & Voas, 2015, for a summary of the findings of recent studies). The introvert is typically introspective, reserved and distant to all but intimate friends (Eysenck & Eysenck, 1991). Introvert clergy have been found to experience higher levels of stress in relation to the burden of isolation (Francis, Laycock, & Brewster, 2015); and of particular note in that respect is some evidence that rural clergy are significantly more introverted than clergy serving in non-rural areas (Francis, Smith, & Robbins, 2004).

Third, the sense of isolation can be exacerbated by length of time spent in ministry. As noted in the report *From Frustration to fulfilment: The final ten years of licensed ministry*, isolation can become more acute the longer individuals serve in ordained ministry (Church of England, 2007, p. 33).

Fourth, clergy can exacerbate the situation themselves: they do this with behaviour that can be deliberate yet not always acknowledged or admitted (Church of England, 2007). In *Multi-congregation Ministry*, Grundy (2015) suggested that:

> creating distance which leads to isolation can be a deliberate role construction. This
> can be compounded by collusion between the leaders who want to feel that they are
> 'different' and their followers … who want to keep responsibility and accountability
> which goes with leadership at arm's length. (p. 128)

Reporting on their research on support for Church of England clergy, Gubi and Korris (2015) noted that 'even with their fellow clergy, competitiveness can detract from supportive colleague relationships. This can lead to profound loneliness and isolation' (p. 21). Pritchard (2007) made a similar point:

> Some tragically misplaced isolationism and competitiveness still bedevils (literally)
> the local church scene, particularly when clergy get together…. The days when we
> could afford rivalry and jealousy are over. Indeed they never existed.' (pp. 105, 132).

Deanery chapter, where rural clergy from adjoining parishes gather regularly 'for fellowship and mutual support' (Archbishops' Council, 2011, p. 2) is one setting where such isolationist behaviour can be manifested (Platten, 2005); and amid the pleasantries and routine exchanges at chapter meetings there can be superficiality (Eatock, 1993) and insecurities (Percy, 2014).

Impact of clergy isolation

Naturally, not all rural clergy are geographically remote from colleagues and friends, or feel isolated; and not all dimensions of isolation are negative (Mills, 2017). However, unaddressed, the burden of isolation that can be experienced in rural multi-parish benefices is especially damaging to clergy work-related psychological health (Francis, Laycock, & Brewster, 2015). A study by Rutledge (2006) indicated that a significant number of clergy in

rural ministry suffer symptoms associated with emotional exhaustion or burnout. As

emotional exhaustion increases and satisfaction in ministry decreases, the frequency with

which ministers consider leaving ministry rises (Randall, 2013). A sense of isolation can

have consequences not only for clergy psychological health and clergy retention, but also for

the effectiveness of rural ministry and mission. It is notable that the 'isolated role for the

parish priest', which has been encouraged by historical patterns of parochial ministry such as

those outlined by Paul (1964), can be problematic as far as reflective thinking is concerned

(Percy, 2014, p. 60).

Support structures for rural ministers

If the impact of clergy isolation can be damaging to individual clergy and thereby to ministry

and mission more generally, then it is important for appropriate mechanisms to be identified

to address the problem. Francis, Laycock, and Brewster (2015) noted that certain component

parts of the burden of isolation may be structural issues that could be addressed, at least in

part. As hinted earlier, mutual support for clergy is likely to be a significant antidote.

Perhaps the most conspicuous mechanism to bring clergy together corporately is Deanery

chapter; yet, if there happens to be a prevailing culture of superficiality and competitiveness,

chapter members may question whether attendance is worthwhile (Eatock, 1993), with the

consequence that this forum can be shunned. So what might be alternatives? Interventions

involving small peer groups and mentoring have been identified as significant strategies to

combat interpersonal isolation and support clergy (Rowatt, 2001; Sturtevant, 2001; Jackson-

Jordan, 2013). A study of barriers to isolated clergy in the US developing and maintaining

close professional relationships revealed that interviewees' strategies included being

intentional about making time for meeting others, participation in groups, and being able to

communicate openly and allow for vulnerability (Staley, McMinn, Gathercoal, & Free,

2013). Yet, it is notable that a study assessing the effectiveness of five different support

strategies in reducing burnout among Presbyterian ministers in the US showed that belonging

to a peer support group had no effect upon levels of emotional exhaustion in ministry nor

upon levels of satisfaction in ministry; nonetheless, the research did reveal an association

between currently having a mentor in ministry and higher levels of satisfaction in ministry

(Francis, Robbins, & Wulff, 2013).

On the basis of the findings reported by Staley et al. (2013), it was theorised that

action learning interventions have the potential to ameliorate the burden of clergy isolation

(Muskett, 2016). A subsequent case study among clergy of the Diocese of Truro, whose

participation in a ministry development programme involved membership of an action

learning set, evidenced the formation of social capital as a by-product of the pedagogical

process; and this was a resource that could be drawn on for personal and professional support

(Muskett & Village, 2016). There are benefits also to participation in a Balint-style support

group, as revealed by a study of clergy in the Diocese of Bristol (Travis, 2008). Clergy

participation in reflexive groups yields psychological benefits (including feeling less

isolated), as revealed by Gubi's (2016a) study involving three Church of England dioceses;

and while the reflexive groups had perceived limitations, these were minimal (Gubi, 2016b).

Context

The survey that forms the basis of the study reported here was administered by a working

party commissioned by the Truro Diocesan Synod, and under the chairmanship of the

Archdeacon of Cornwall (co-author of this article). The working party wished to scope the

problem of clergy isolation in the diocese and to discover current and potential solutions.

Having regard to the literature about how to combat isolation in ministry and to guideline

14.6 for the Professional Conduct of the Clergy which includes the statement that 'The clergy

should be encouraged to develop opportunities for mutual support and pastoral care within Chapters, cell groups or other peer-groupings' (Convocations of Canterbury and York, 2015), the working party's starting point was that 'experience and research suggest that a model of strong working relationships between clergy promote a healthier church and model creative and positive ways of working' and that 'the failure of positive mutual relationships can contribute to isolation and clergy breakdown' (Never Alone Working Party, 2016, p. 2).

The Diocese of Truro is one of the least populated in the Church of England, ranked 38 of 43 by Archbishops' Council Research & Statistics (2014): it covers 1,390 square miles, with a population of 540,000 and a density of 390 persons per square mile. It is located in the far south-west of England and is almost coterminous with Cornwall, which is surrounded by sea on all flanks save the Devon border. Poverty levels are high. 'There are no motorways in Cornwall and once over the River Tamar it feels a long way from the rest of England,' wrote Barley (2015) introducing her study of the diocesan cathedral's ministry; 'London is five hours by train and transport by plane is far from reliable because of the frequent sea fogs' (pp. 404-5).

The diocese has one of the smallest Christian populations of all the Church of England dioceses (ranked 41 of 43) and of all the dioceses it has the greatest proportion of worshippers aged 70 and over (48%) and the smallest proportion of those aged 0 to 17 years (11%) (Archbishops' Council Research & Statistics, 2016). Church attendances there (Sunday, weekly, and at festivals) declined faster over the period between 2009 and 2013 than in the rest of the Anglican Church (Archbishops' Council Research & Statistics, 2014). The overarching vision for the diocese is to 'Discover God's Kingdom and Grow the Church' (Diocese of Truro, 2018). In 2014, the diocese introduced an innovative ministry development programme (known as Accompanied Ministry Development or AMD) in which all incumbent clergy participated between 2014 and 2018; an enhanced version of the

programme (to include a wider group of ministers) is rolling out from 2018[1]. The diocese takes seriously reflective and evidence-based practice; and it has provided the field of study for recent research not only on action learning in the AMD Programme, as noted above (Muskett & Village, 2016), but also on the contribution of retired clergy to supporting and sustaining ministry in a rural diocese (Francis, Rolph, Rolph, & Windsor, 2013) and mentoring in first incumbency (Neal, 2015).

Method

Research questions

The working party (comprising the Archdeacon and other serving clergy, including some with academic expertise in relevant fields) devised a series of research questions on the basis of the literature review, informal soundings around the diocese and their own ministerial and professional experience. The working party took the view that the set of questions in the first exploration of this issue within the diocese should be relatively brief in order to attain the best possible response rate. A lengthy questionnaire could have been regarded as yet one more 'overwhelming' for clergy who already faced a myriad of pressures (see Pritchard, 2007, p. 159 on the notion of 'multiple overwhelmings' for clergy; and Ford, 2012 on how being overwhelmed can be an isolating experience).

First, the working party wished to establish the population of clergy serving in the diocese who reported feeling isolated. Second, it wished to establish the extent to which the experience of isolation varied between stipendiary and self-supporting clergy, and between clergy working in teams and those working alone. Their third research question concerned the support structures that clergy already had in place to help in their ministry. Their fourth research question concerned future solutions: how the clergy and the diocese might create new opportunities for mutual support for clergy in their current context.

Procedure

In February 2016, all licensed ordained ministers serving in the Diocese of Truro received an email, sent on behalf of the working party, which invited them to participate in an online survey. This email provided a link to the SurveyMonkey site, where the questionnaire had been created and responses were collected. Replies were anonymous and confidential.

Participants

Of the 128 priests invited to participate, 87 completed the survey, making a response rate of 68%. Of the 87 participants, 13 (15%) had been in ordained ministry for less than 5 years; 29 (33%) had been in ordained ministry for between 5 and 14 years; 9 (10%) had been in ordained ministry for between 15 and 19 years; 22 (25%) had been in ordained ministry for between 20 and 29 years; 11(13%) had been in ordained ministry for between 30 and 39 years; and 3 (3%) had been in ordained ministry for 40 years or more.

Instrument

The first four questions in the survey gathered background information on how many years participants had been in ordained ministry; in what context they ministered (options: rural, urban, multi-parish, or other – please specify); whether they were stipendiary or self-supporting; and whether they were part of a clergy team or the sole clergyperson in the benefice.

The experience of isolation was assessed by inviting participants to rate how isolated they felt in their ministry on a five-point scale: not isolated at all (1), a little isolated (2), isolated (3), pretty isolated (4), and extremely isolated (5).

Current support structures were assessed by inviting participants to respond to the question 'What support structures do you already have in place (locally or further afield) to help you in ministry?' The options were: other clergy, cell group, lay people, chapter, and other – please specify.

Future solutions were assessed by inviting participants to respond to two open-ended questions: 'Do you have any ideas as to how you may create new opportunities for mutual support in your current context?' and 'Do you have any ideas as to how the diocese might help to enable such mutual support?'

Analysis

Frequency counts and cross-tabulations were conducted using the SPSS software. Responses to the open-ended questions were analysed manually in order to discern and identify singular and recurrent themes.

Results and discussion

The participants' ministry

Of the 87 participants, 50 (57%) reported that they ministered in a rural context, and 15 (17%) in an urban context. Of the 87, 41 (47%) reported that they ministered in a multi-parish context. A further 14 participants (16%) reported that they ministered in other contexts (which included chaplaincy, diocesan appointments and Theological Education).

Almost four-fifths of the participants (79%) held a stipendiary role, whereas the remainder (21%) were self-supporting. Just over half (52%) were part of a clergy team, the remainder (48%) reporting that they were the sole clergyperson in a benefice.

Experience of isolation

The mean isolation score recorded on the five-point scale for all 87 participants was slightly below the central point, at 2.26. This score is reflected in the following ratings: one third of the participants reported that they did not feel isolated at all (33%), and another third reported that they felt a little isolated (33%). The remaining one third felt isolated, with 14% checking the category 'isolated', 13% checking the category 'pretty isolated' and 7% checking the category 'extremely isolated'.

Table 1 compares the mean scale scores of isolation by type and context of ministry, distinguishing between: stipendiary clergy and self-supporting clergy; clergy working alone and clergy working within teams; clergy working in a multi-parish context and those elsewhere; and those who had spent between 5 and 14 years in ordained ministry (that is, up to 10 years post-curacy) and those who had spent a total of 20 or more years in ordained ministry. The data demonstrate that stipendiary clergy record significantly higher scores of isolation compared with self-supporting clergy; that clergy working alone record significantly higher scores of isolation compared with clergy working within teams; and that clergy working in a multi-parish context record significantly higher scores of isolation compared with clergy working in other contexts. Yet, contrary to the suggestion in the report *From fulfilment to frustration: The final ten years of licensed ministry* (Church of England, 2007), there was no significant difference between the mean isolation score of those who had spent a longer time in ordained ministry (20+ years) compared with those who had spent a shorter time in ordained ministry (5 to 14 years).

Current support structures

The question concerning support structures already in place (locally or further afield) to help in ministry was answered by all participants. The 'other – please specify' option was chosen by 46 participants. Three of the 46 responded with an answer equivalent to one of the other options, so their responses were re-coded appropriately.

The majority of participants (79%) reported that they were supported by other clergy. Just over half (53%) reported that deanery chapter was a support structure. Nearly a quarter of participants (23%) were supported by a cell group and 6% by another small group. Just 8% reported that a ministry team was a support structure to help in their ministry. Lay people formed the support structure for 70% of participants. Family and/or friends formed the support structure for 8% and 9% respectively. About one sixth of participants (16%) reported that their support structures included a spiritual director, 2% that their support structure included a mentor, 2% a work supervisor, 2% their AMD Advisor and another 2% a network generated through the AMD Programme. A further 2% reported that their support structure included Church House or diocesan staff; and a further 2% reported different forms of support. Finally, 5% reported that their support structure included a regional or national network, and 2% said theirs included a religious community.

Correlations between the feeling of isolation in ministry and the various support structures which priests declared were already in place to help them in their ministry revealed only one statistically significant relationship (a negative one): between the isolation score and the answer 'other clergy' ($r = -.40$, $p < 0.01$). This indicates that participants who are already supported in their ministry by other clergy are less likely to feel isolated in ministry.

Future solutions

A total of 40 participants offered some notion in response to the question seeking ideas as to how clergy might create new opportunities for mutual support in their current context. In

addition, 11 simply said 'No'. Whether these participants sensed that their situation was fairly hopeless or they were just short of ideas was unclear. Another person replied: 'Not enough people around to be choosy'. One person simply wrote 'Lots', but did not proceed to share those ideas. The remainder did not offer ideas.

Seven participants wrote that they saw no need. Most of those who saw no need were upbeat. One wrote 'I am well supported', and another replied 'I already have good support … church people are great!'. A different participant wrote: 'I have many friends and don't feel isolated at all. I have not been looking for new opportunities'; and another said 'I do not feel the need as I have support of my family and a few people who I know I could speak to in confidence'. Ministry teams were praised by two participants. One of these said: 'I work as part of a staff team in our church and this is invaluable'. The other wrote: 'We have already created a staff team of lay and ordained people working together'.

The most popular of the various ideas proposed by the 40 included team-working with local clergy and/or laity (suggested by 10 participants) and initiatives through the deanery chapter (suggested by 10 participants). Initiatives involving the laity were suggested by five participants. Informal social activity among clergy was suggested by five priests as a way of creating mutual support. One participant wrote: 'Finding like-minded friends whom I can be myself with is proving a challenge. I probably need to find ways to build trust with some of the local clergy'. Another wrote: 'Best support I found was over lunch, with those clergy who I got on with'. A different participant suggested: 'Perhaps create social events such as ten-pin bowling etc, which would encourage conversations in the bar afterwards'. Four people suggested getting a mentor; three suggested participating in shared ministry; and three suggested joining a cell group as a way to create new opportunities for mutual support. Two priests pointed to the AMD Programme (for example, an action learning set) as a means to achieve mutual support. Two others highlighted the possibility of making greater use of IT.

One of these wrote: 'Most of us have time constraints, so maybe there are some untapped ideas and resources that are internet-based that we could mimic/adopt'; and the other mentioned exploring the use of Skype. Another two reported that they would look to an area or regional network to create new opportunities for mutual support in their current context. Different ideas were proposed by 11 participants: these included ecumenical developments, pulpit swops, developing clusters of churches, and learning from good practice elsewhere in the Church of England.

Among those who mentioned deanery chapter in their reply to this question, one made the following observation: 'The building up of clergy chapter meetings is a way that allows for more opportunity for informal relationships to be built, rather than just formal meetings, i.e. combining business with a meal'. Another recommended making chapter 'a more exciting and life-giving event'. Yet another declared: 'Weekly chapter meetings are really supportive'. But another quipped: 'Being told about chapter meetings would help'.

The final open-ended question, which sought to elicit ideas as to how the diocese might help to enable mutual support, was answered by 62 clergy, although 10 of those participants simply wrote 'No'. Various ideas were offered by the remaining 52. Eight suggested enhancing the way deanery chapter operates; and once again, participants pointed to the ineffectiveness of some chapters. One priest said: 'Yes, I am part of a deanery chapter, but do not feel I see this as a "support structure"'. Others observed: 'Chapter is too large, infrequent and formal for effective mutual support' and 'Chapter is of no use at all'. One requested 'Better and more regular chapter meetings' and another suggested 'Encourage deaneries to meet weekly or at least monthly'. In this connection, it is striking to read that, more than half a century ago, Paul (1964) recognised the benefits of regular chapter meetings for mutual support and recommended a minimum requirement of a monthly deanery chapter meeting, with worship and a meal (pp. 182–3).

Other solutions included encouraging more collaboration among local clergy (six priests), mounting special clergy support days (three priests) or giving more prominence to networking opportunities during Continuing Ministerial Education events (two priests), and offering more team training (one priest). One-to-one support was the solution suggested by some: two proposed wider use of spiritual directors and four proposed the wider use of mentors. One of the latter wrote 'I have been offered a mentor – great – perhaps everyone should have one' and another wrote 'Offering mentors for new clergy, in their area, who they can talk to about issues and context'. Encourage the formation of small groups was the response of four priests. A further two suggested clergy colleges such as those in the AMD programme: 'The clergy colleges of AMD seem to have done much to engender greater fellowship', wrote one of them. A solution that involved the dissemination of information and/or advice was suggested by three. Solutions proposed by six involved Church House staff and/or the bishops offering a greater level of pastoral support, and the suggestion of one of these was 'Releasing bishops / senior staff from much red tape to have a more pastoral role'.

A further nine participants urged caution. Some appreciated that the challenge faced by the diocese was not easy. For example, one said 'A mammoth task as each person's needs will vary'. But others were sceptical that a solution could be found through new diocesan initiatives. One said: 'This could be done without diocesan input'. Another wrote: 'Definitely no more initiatives'. Yet another wrote this heartfelt plea: 'Stop the initiatives and give support for what we are doing already'. Three more participants urged caution using these words: 'Remember that one size doesn't fit all'; 'I think most successful support is to be found "bottom up" not prescribed "top down"; and 'You cannot impose mutuality'. These are fair points and in line with the conclusions of the study in the USA reported by Bloom (2013), entitled *Flourishing in Ministry*:

> Efforts to encourage friendships among pastors … must recognise that friendships begin with deep similarity, a connection between individuals that expresses a match between something essential in both people. These relationships are hard to create from the outside; the best approach might be to give pastors more opportunities to 'bump into each other' … the more pastors are exposed to each other, the more likely a friendship will emerge. (p. 48)

Such a strategy acknowledges the value of 'incidental chatting' (Percy, 2014), perhaps during refreshment breaks at diocesan training days, where stories of parish ministry can be shared (Walker, 2016). Accordingly, the strategy underscores the significance of well-planned continuing professional development and ministry development opportunities, such as AMD.

The responses of two other priests indicated that they were fearful of being overwhelmed by solutions. One warned: 'Be sensitive to the right balance to avoid the busyness of too many meetings!' Another wrote: 'Encourage the work-based learning group or journey group model but it needs to be self-selecting rather than prescribed. It will just feel like another pressure on the diary unless people choose themselves to make it a commitment of time'.

Conclusion

This study aimed to establish the proportion of clergy in one rural diocese who reported feelings of isolation; the extent to which the experience of isolation varied between stipendiary and self-supporting clergy and between clergy working in teams and those working alone; what support structures the clergy already had in place to help in their ministry; and how they and the diocese concerned might create new opportunities for mutual support in their current context. A sense of isolation was not universal and among the 87 clergy who replied, one third did not feel isolated at all. However, another one third felt a

little isolated, and the remainder felt isolated (with one in five reporting they felt either pretty isolated or extremely isolated). Stipendiary priests and those working alone recorded significantly higher isolation scores as compared with self-supporting priests and those working in teams, respectively. What is unknown is the extent to which any sense of isolation impacted upon participants' work-related psychological health.

When invited to offer possible solutions to a sense of isolation, nearly half suggested how they might improve their own circumstances, and around three out of every five participants suggested ways in which the diocese might ameliorate the situation. Other participants felt adequately supported and saw no need to broaden their support base. Of those who ventured to suggest ideas, several pointed to deanery chapter as a context where changes could be made (perhaps increasing opportunities for informal interaction, over a meal, rather than simply focusing on matters of business). The survey responses indicate that where there are weekly chapter meetings in the diocese, clergy find them supportive. Yet, it is evident that not all clergy in the diocese are equally blessed; and there were several pleas for more frequent and/or more effective chapter meetings. This is one structural issue impacting upon the sense of isolation deserving of attention by the diocese.

Some participants saw potential solutions to isolation in rural ministry in team-working, collaboration and shared ministry with local clergy (though the need for team training was raised). One-to-one support from a mentor or spiritual director was a suggestion from a few participants, as was encouraging the formation of small peer groups. Enhanced pastoral support by senior staff was the solution offered by some participants. Again, the survey responses provide clues to how the diocese might enhance the experience of rural ministers burdened by a sense of isolation.

Certain participants looked for opportunities to form natural friendships with other clergy; and the literature review showed that positive bonds between clergy have beneficial

effects. However, while the diocese could be instrumental in creating additional opportunities for ministers to be exposed to each other and interact informally, mutuality cannot be forced, as one survey participant emphasised. Moreover, if the creation of such opportunities is perceived as 'yet another initiative' from a diocese, the leadership runs the risk of the occasions being shunned. Another danger for any diocese is that strategies to address isolation may create further pressure on already busy diaries and be perceived as one more overwhelming.

Postscript

In November 2016, in light of the findings of the study, Truro Diocesan Synod approved a proposal from the working party to create and promote a culture of mutual support, encouragement and collaboration among its clergy; and steps were taken to implement the policy at various levels. These encompassed: the discernment and formation process; IME Phase 2 (including embedding working practices and expectations that develop and support collegial working and reflective theological practice, and the provision of work-based learning groups for curates and encouragement to seek supervision or mentoring); appointments procedures; offering a mentor or 'buddy' to those new to the diocese (and creating a pool of existing clergy to fulfil such roles); first incumbencies (the introduction of a training programme and the offering of a suitably skilled and experienced mentor); training incumbents (equipping them to model collegiality and good practice); the Episcopal College (modelling a collegial way of working, rooted in an understanding of Christ's humanity and promoting individual flourishing); rural deans (opportunities for training in group facilitation and also for their own mutual support); work-based learning groups (a formal extension of the action learning sets within the AMD Programme); facilitation training (open to all clergy and laity with leadership responsibility); and Ministerial Development Reviews (to include

direct enquiry around individual needs for support and the extent of collegial working experienced).

Possible follow-up work

It would be beneficial to survey all clergy of the Truro Diocese in a few years' time to assess levels of isolation afresh. Benchmarking responses against data from the 2016 survey would provide an insight into the extent to which addressing structural issues has the capacity to impact upon the sense of clergy isolation. The 2016 survey was relatively short and the working party attributed the good response rate in part to the brevity of the questions. However, a principal limitation of the questionnaire was the lack of certain data against which to test possible correlations. For example, data were not collected on gender or marital status; and there was no measure of psychological type (which would reveal whether participants were potentially prone to feelings of social isolation), or of emotional exhaustion in ministry and/or of satisfaction in ministry, such as those employed in quantitative studies of clergy burnout elsewhere (for example, Francis, Robbins, & Wulff, 2013; Randall, 2013). In addition, a longer questionnaire could invite clergy to evaluate existing support structures (e.g. other clergy, deanery chapter, lay people), including those within the AMD Programme, and also to indicate whether there were perceived barriers to supports. It is therefore recommended that consideration be given within the diocese to conducting a more comprehensive survey next time.

Table 1. Mean isolation scores by type and context of ministry.

	Group one			Group two				
	N	*M*	*SD*	*n*	*M*	*SD*	*t*	*p<*
Stipendiary clergy vs self-supporting clergy	69	2.42	1.30	18	1.67	0.77	3.15	.01
Sole clergy vs Team clergy	42	2.57	1.35	45	1.98	1.08	2.26	.05
Multi-parish clergy vs other context clergy	41	2.46	1.43	46	2.09	1.03	1.40	.01
Time in ministry: 5-14 years vs 20 years+	29	2.34	1.20	36	2.19	1.31	0.48	*NS*

Notes

1. Seven cohorts of between 10 and 12 incumbent clergy each participated in the Accompanied Ministry Development programme, 2014-18, with staggered start dates from 2014 to 2017. The first year for each cohort included five four-day residential Clergy Colleges, designed 'to nurture church ministers, offer intellectual stimulus, provide space for prayer and reflection and allow time for refreshment'. During this time, each participant was supported by an AMD Advisor. The Colleges included action learning sets. Details are set out in the *AMD Programme Guide*, December 2015 (see https://www.trurodiocese.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/AMD-Programme-Guide-Version-4-2-December-2015.pdf).

Note on contributors

The Venerable Bill Stuart-White (Archdeacon of Cornwall), the Revd Canon Jane Vaughan-Wilson (Diocesan Director of Ordinands) and the Revd John Eatock served on the 'Never Alone Working Party' in the Diocese of Truro. Dr Judith A. Muskett (Visiting Fellow in the School of Humanities, Religion & Philosophy, York St John University) and Professor Andrew Village (Professor of Practical and Empirical Theology, York St John University) worked on a project to evaluate the Accompanied Ministry Development programme in the Diocese of Truro.

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